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ABSTRACT

How psychologists and theologians define the peak/spiritual experience and how this aspect of human behavior can be approached in the classroom are examined. Benjamin Bloom interviewed college students who had undergone peak experiences in the classroom. The students described a sense of total involvement, a loss of a sense of time and place, and a feeling that the experience was true in a fundamental way. Similarly, the writings of Abraham Maslow and the literature of theologians show the peak experience to be awesome, fundamental (a moment of truth), and transcendent. Language used by thoughtful people in discussing the peak experience can be organized into five categories: (1) intellectual aspects, (2) transcendence, (3) terms that characterize the experience as a whole, (4) terms that characterize particular aspects of the experience, and (5) the mystic experience. The disciplines of mathematics, science, history, literature, and the arts show that many characteristics of the peak experience, e.g., the sense of the wonderful, the amazing, can be found in subject matter. In order to evaluate peak experience in the classroom, teachers must collect and analyze subjective testimony; they must listen to students. (RM)

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THE PEAK/SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AS AN OBJECT OF CURRICULUM ANALYSIS

By

Arthur W. Foshay

Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the
Social Science Education Consortium and the
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Since the beginning of the modern measurement movement, instruments for the evaluation and analysis of educational experience have moved more and more from reliance on discrete, tangible, "real" data to attempts to deal with complex experiential processes. Two generations ago, this kind of movement found outstanding expression in the 8 Year Study book by Smith and Tyler, Appraising and Recording Student Progress, in which the authors offered instruments to measure something as apparently intangible as critical thinking. Although the Grey Oral Reading Paragraphs of the 30's /are not usually thought of this way, that instrument also moved away from the narrow, recognition-memoritor instruments that had preceded it as measures of reading achievement. Projective devices and content analysis reflect a similar freedom from a preoccupation with narrow "facts", which emphasis had been criticized from many sides, including the criticism by Kohler in the German edition of his seminal work on Gestalt Psychology.

More recently, research and evaluation people such as Robert Stake and Egon Guba have called for approaches that examine unreconstructed reality, using data-gathering techniques variously called "naturalistic" and "anthropological".

This being so, it is not surprising that a few psychologists have looked beyond measurement to naturally occuring phenomena, some of them strange, for consideration.

One of these was Abraham Maslow, who in 1959 began writing about what he called "the peak experience". Benjamin Bloom, in the early '60's, examined this phenomenon further and called for research on the possibility that the experience takes place in school.

What Bloom did was to interview 30 graduate students ~~at the~~

~~University~~ to see whether they had undergone peak experiences in the classroom as an aspect of instruction. A few of them had; their descriptions of the experience form the basis for Bloom's analysis of it.

Here, I wish to place Bloom's analysis and Maslow's in a context that has come to interest me recently.

My interest in the matter arises from certain experiences I have had. I will describe one of these, case-study fashion, and then indicate where my speculations about it have taken me.

It was more than twenty years ago, but I still remember it vividly. I was with a busload of sightseers in Rome. I was a stranger to the city then, so I didn't know where we were. We stopped at an elegant small church a little way from the heart of the city, and the guide took us in to admire the building. At one side of the alter and to the rear of it was Michelangelo's Moses.

I was transfixed. The statue suddenly became my entire universe. I lost all sense of time and place; I lost track of the touring group, which went on its way without me; I was utterly absorbed in the wonder of the statue. I don't know how long I stood before it. Moses looked in rage at his people; the tablets fell from his hands. He was experiencing the shock of human frailty, having just come from God. For me, the experience transcended the place, the craft of the sculptor, the fact that, after all, I was looking at marble. There was a majesty, an awesome presence, an intensity to the moment that has remained with me to this day.

Now, this encounter of mine corresponds rather closely to what Maslow calls a "peak experience". Aside from Bloom and

some further writing by Maslow, I have not found psychologists pursuing it, however. It occured to me that those we call great teachers bring about some such experience among their students. Barak Rosenshine, who has analyzed the research on teaching, refers to a quality he calls "enthusiasm" among such teachers, but this seems to me not to deal with the experience I had in Rome and that Bloom and Maslow describe. Lawrence Kohlberg speculates about children's notions of the transcendent, but doesn't deal with the experience.

As I say, I found next to nothing among psychologists on the matter. It occured to me that another rubric might assist my search. I tried several: the astonishing, the marvellous, the awesome, the wonderful. None got me anywhere. Then I hit on one that did. The experience had indeed been discussed at length and for a long time by a group of scholars usually ignored by the social and behavioral scientists. The scholars in question are the theologians, and they call the experience the spiritual.

I turned to the theologians. What, according to them, was the nature of this experience? What did it signify? What was its source? I received some help from acquaintances who are theologians, and began a fascinating journey into their discipline. What I read was the acknowledged classic in the field, Rudolph Otto's The Idea of the Holy (Das Heilige); also Buber's I and Thou; Tillich's Theology of Culture; Philip Phenix's "Transcendence and the Curriculum"; two books by Huston Smith, Forgotten Truth and Beyond the Post Modern Mind; and another classic, Evelyn Underhill's Worship; also some less significant, less fruitful pieces, including one of my own, "Intuition and Curriculum".

I continued reading in this field until it began to repeat itself concerning the nature and origin of the spiritual experience. Of course, the literature dealt with much more than this, but I did not intend to try to become a theologian, only to find what theologians had to say about this one aspect of ~~the life of the spirit~~ human experience. When, as I say, the theolggians began to repeat themselves, I stopped.

To begin with, the theologians found much of what Maslow had found, and more.

First, they offer evidence that the spiritual experience is universal and ancient among human beings. All men, everywhere and always, have recognized that there is existence beyond their control and understanding. Primitive societies recognize this in the actualities of birth, growth, and death; they also see it in the enormous, often hostile, forces of nature.

Mankind has responded to this awareness in many ways: through ritual, supplication, religion, myth,art objects, emphasis and subordination of habits and feelings (such as celebrations and taboos), and so on.

In connection with these observances, people have had transforming experiences. The literature of the world's religions is full of testimony to this fact, and it has found repeated expression in great literature.

The idea of the spiritual begins with awe—fear. Nature was viewed as essentially hostile to humans, as in the Anglo-Saxon epic, Beowulf, where Beowulf battles Grendel, the monster-dragon. In both Norse and Greek myth, a capricious, often hostile nature was personified

as gods and spirits such as Thor, Apollo, and Vulcan, to be feared and placated. Otto calls this "daemonic dread". (Otto, p. 72-73)

This dread eventually evolved into the great world religions, as well as into tribal religions among the more primitive peoples.

In the Western world, the original fear developed into statements of aesthetic importance in all the art forms: dance, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, drama, prose. In our century, it has found its way into film.

At the same time, what had begun as fear became wonder, and astonishment, and amazement at the nature of things.

It even entered into mankind's sense of existence. Nature was viewed as essentially dimensional. There is the Earth, where Man dwells; there is the space between Earth and Heaven, where dwell the demons; there is Heaven, which is beyond Man's comprehension, where dwell the gods. Early man saw the general in the particular--e.g., all of terror in ~~the~~ a lion--just as Wordsworth did--e.g., the universe in a daffodil. As Huston Smith put it: "the terrestrial plane proceeds from and is explained by the intermediate, the intermediate by the celestial, and the celestial by the Infinite". (Smith, 1977, p. 42)

The dimensional, spherical shape of existence was expressed in many ways. Marshall McLuhan once pointed out to me that the experience of medieval man in the cathedreal was spherical, in that when he was inside the building, all the most significant aspects of his world came at him from all directions simultaneously. The earth-centered cosmology of the time was also spherical; the earth was at the center of a series of spheres, the lesser contained in the greater, from which the lesser derived its meaning. The

whole system was believed to be in perfect harmony.

Two of the basic attributes of the spiritual experience arise from this account: the experience of dread, or awe, or fearfulness; and the experience of connectedness with something greater than one's self.

Philip Phenix calls this sense of connectedness the transcendent. There are other terms that have gathered round the idea. Otto calls it the "wholly other"; Tillich, "the ground of being", or the "unconditioned", in which one deals with matters of "ultimate concern". "Ritual", says Paul Jones, the Jesuit, "derives its energy and focus from the transcendent present in the individual or community consciousness or belief". Phenix says that "the term 'transcendent' refers to the experience of limitless going beyond any given state or realization of being." He points to "cognate" terms: spirit, infinitude, idealization. He continues by indicating how the idea of transcendence corresponds with Dewey's notion of the continuous progressive reconstruction of experience.

Let us compare what the theologians have found in the long cultural history of humanity with what Benjamin Bloom found in his interviews with those few among his students who reported that they had undergone "peak experiences" in the classroom.

First, Bloom's students reported a sense of total involvement, analagous to my experience with the Michelangelo. Second, the students reported a loss of a sense of time and place--"the learning experience became the figure, while the ground...disappered." Third, there was a feeling that the experience was true in a fundamental way, and "... organizing, analytic, and application types of thinking were temporarily suspended." (Bloom, p. 195)

Fourth, Bloom's students describe the experience as "awe-inspiring", "wonderful".

You will have noticed how the experience of Bloom's students corresponds in part with the analysis by the theologians: the experience is awesome , and it is fundamental--a moment of truth--or, as Phenix would have it, transcendent.

Back to the theologians. They claim that the spiritual experience is latent in everyone and that it is awakened in us. It is, I repeat, an awakening, or a sudden awareness of the connection between that which is immediately apparent and a vastly larger sphere of being.

This flash of awareness corresponds with the reports of Maslow and Bloom. Maslow calls it an "illumination, a revelation, an insight" which leads to "the cognition of being". (Maslow 1982, p. 169). Unlike the theologians, Maslow distinguishes between the people he calls "self actualizing" (i.e., fully mature and internally organized) and ordinary people. The self actualizing people have frequent peak experiences; the ordinary people have the experiences far less often. The theologians claim that the spiritual experience is universal among people, and latent in everyone, to be awakened (or, as Maslow would say, "triggered").

These sudden awakenings are sometimes seen in the theological tradition as mystic visions. Mystics have reported them since the earliest times. Mysticism arises from a self-immolating sense of encounter with ultimate reality. It is expressed non-rationally in poetry, and in assertions like this from Martin Luther: "Such a gift should only kindle a fire and light in our heart, so that we should never cease dancing and leaping for joy". Or this, the most

famous mystic statement in English, Blake's Tyger:

> Tyger, tyger burning bright
> In the forests of the night
> What immortal hand or eye
> Framed thy fearful symmetry

It is often remarked that it is impossible to translate a lyric poem into another language. One must write a new poem in the new language. The most appropriate response to a lyric poem is another poem. Similarly, the most appropriate response to a mystic experience is mystic behavior--poetry, or "dancing and leaping for joy".

The idea of the spiritual thus seems to have a scope: from deamonic dread, or awe, at one extreme, to mystic expression at the other. The term "spiritual" includes the entire range of meanings in our time. It has shed none of the meanings it has ever had. The only new term associated with it is Otto's numinous, which "can only be induced, incited, and aroused" (Otto, p. 60), or, in Maslow's language, "triggered" (Maslow, 1982, p. 168).

It is interesting that both the theologians and Maslow fail to conceptualize the spiritual/peak experience, though they all claim that the experience is real. The idea seems to exist in a cloud of meaning, not as a concept. It is a "state of mind", "purely felt experience, only to be indicated symbolically, by 'ideograms'", says Otto (p. 59). In this sense, it is non-rational, somewhat as the beauty of music is non-rational. The idea of the spiritual goes beyond reason, as several of us maintained in a book Irving Morrissett and I edited and I contributed to in 1978.

What does one do to grasp a cloud? To use reason to consider what goes beyond reason? I have chosen to look at the language

used by thoughtful people in discussing the spiritual/peak experience. In so doing, I find a considerable overlap among the theologians and Maslow and Bloom. I have, therefore, first listed the terms used in connection with the experience as they appear in the writings of these people, and then categorized the language according to the way it seems to me to cluster.

Otto, Rudolph: The Idea of the Holy, passim.

non-rational
transcendent
an awakening
awesome
fearful
dreadful
overpowering
numinous
stupifying
an encounter with the "wholly other"
mysterious
daunting
fascinating
uncanny
sublime
silent
dark
full of wonder
daemonic dread
incomprehensible
eerie
amazing
wonderful

Tillich, Paul: Theology of Culture, passim.

holy
meaningful
ultimate meaning
awe-inspiring
ultimate courage
essential being
inner experience

Smith, Huston: Forgotten Truth, passim.

Being unlimited
infinite
psychic plane
tropism of the soul toward the universe
wonder
astonishing
unimaginable

inexpressible
mystic vision
transcendent character of the real
full consciousness

Smith, Huston: Beyond the Post Modern Mind. passim.

mysteriously wonderful
shudder
the flash
thrilling
resonance
inrush of the real
insight
astounding mystery

Philip Phenix, "Transcendence and the Curriculum", passim.

singular awareness
inner illumination
inimitable personal being
multidisciplinary
reverence
surprising
creativity
faithful doubt
awareness
hope
universality
boundless
infinitude
spirit
idealization

Benjamin Bloom, "Peak Learning Experiences", passim

all-encompassing
fundamental unity of experience
total involvement
surprising
awe-inspiring
wonderful
unique
of great moment
true
fundamental

Abraham Maslow, The Farther Reaches of Human Nature, passim.

illumination
revelation
insight
cognition of being
real excellence
real perfection
perfect justice

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perfect values
glimpse of infinite
ultimate values
pure delight
good, desirable
awe
wonder
amaz ament
humility
reverence
exaltation
piety
sacred
admiration
timeless
spaceless
detached from ground
a reality independent of man, and persisting beyond his life
choiceless awareness
passive
selfless
dreamy
non-voluntary
surrender
overwhelming
piercing
poignant
transcendence
loss of fear
fusion of outer and inner being

You will have noticed that some terms are repeated across these writers. That fact, plus a need to reach across this literature for some order, led me to categorize this language. I found five categories: (1) the intellectual aspects of the peak/spiritual experience; (2) "going beyond", or transcendence; (3) terms that characterize the experience as a whole; (4) terms that characterize particular aspects of the experience (there is some overlap between these two); and, finally, (5) the mystic experience. Here is how the terms seem to me to group themselves:

/. Intellectual Aspects of the Spiritual/Peak experience.

non-rational
stupifying
uncanny

incomprehensible
meaningful
ultimate meaning
infinite
unimaginable
full consciousness
multidisiplinary
creativity
faithful doubt
infinitude
idealization
insight
boundless
perception of the concrete

2. "Going Beyond"--transcendence

transcendent
wholly other
holy
ultimate meaning
ultimate courage
essential being
being unlimited
tropism of the soul toward the universe
transcendent character of the real
numinous
fundamental
cognition of being
glimpse of the infinite
ultimate values

3, The experience as a whole

an awakening
inner experience
psychic plane
singular awareness
inimitably personal being
all-encompassing
fundamental unity
total involvement
surprising
illumination
revalation
insight
real excellence
real perfection
perfect justice
perfect values
good, desirable
piety
sacred
admiration
detached from ground
independent of man & persisting beyond his life

choiceless awareness
passive
selfless
dreamy
non-voluntary
surrender
overwhelming
fusion of inner and outer being

4. The more detailed qualities of the experience

amazing
humility
reverence
exaltation
piercing
poignant
loss of fear
unique
of great moment
true

5. The mystic aspects of th experience

sublime
spirit
reverence
hope
hate
exaltation

As Kaufman says in his translation of Buber's I and Thou, "the writer seems less concerned with precise denotation than with rich connotations and associations" (Buber, p. 140)

These categories require some thought. The first two--the intellectual and the transcendent--are essentially cognitive in character. It is as if the spiritual/peak experience begins in the mind. But it doesn't. It begins as a kind of assault on one's sense of existence. The assault, as both Maslow and the theologians agree, is in some part intellectual, in some part an assault on pure reason. As Bloom points out, "...organizaing, analytic, application types of thinking were temporarily suspended." The experience is self-contained. It is not instrumental to anything else.

Well, now. Benjamin Bloom and many other worthy people have spent their professional lives precisely on the task of analyzing human behavior to the end that it may be measured and evaluated. The aspect of human behavior we examine here appears to defy such analysis, if one is to believe those who have given it the most serious attention. How shall it be approached? Perhaps by adopting the scholarly methods of the theologians and of Maslow, the clinician. Both seem to proceed in essentially the same way—and so did Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues.

The method takes as its domain the testimony of people who have undergone the experience. The theologians gather this testimony from many sources: writings of mystics over several thousand years; the sacred writings of the principal world religions; the writings of other theologians; and the characteristics of religious institutions and artifacts. Maslow drew on his experience as a clinician, in particular listening to the accounts of his "self-actualized" clients. Bloom and his colleagues interviewed 80 students.

The truth-claiming of these scholars rests on verification by the reader. The theologians seem to say the following:

1. Here is the testimony of the ages that Mankind is capable of spiritual experience.
2. Look in on yourself. Do you not resonate to these accounts?
3. Here is my theory of the origin and significance of this experience as it bears on certain classic theological questions.

Maslow and Bloom seem to do much the same: offer the testimony of their clients or students, leave it to the reader to recognize

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not To theology but

parallels in his own experience, and apply the data to education, which is their real-world preoccupation, both being academics.

It seems unlikely that the evidence of this behavior will become less subjective and more specifiable than it is now. This being the case, the methods of inquiry applied to these data will have to depart from the emphasis on measurement of achievement that has dominated the field of evaluation until very recently.

The theologians I have read are unanimous in rejecting the classic scientific methods used in social science as inapplicable to their concerns. Maslow, too, calls his "peak experience" notions "strange for a scientist".

The theologians, especially, are aware of the shift in the notion of reality and truth that has taken place since Darwin. They are sensitive to the fact that what they claim as truth is generally discounted by the dominant scientific community.

Huston Smith tells of a conversation he had with a scientist while teaching at M.I.T.:

> . . . as so often happened in such circumstances, the conversation turned to the difference between science and the humanities. We were getting nowhere when suddenly he broke in on something I was saying with the authority of a man who has discovered Truth. "I have it," he exclaimed. "The difference between us is that I count, and you don't." (Smith, 1977, p. 11)

What a <u>double entendre</u>! What arrogance!

Smith spends even more effort than the other theologians consulted here on the distinctive character of theological inquiry and the limitations of scientific inquiry. However, Otto's "non-rational", "numinous" concept goes beyond scientific logic; Buber's "It-world" (the world of science) is the limited world

that fails to admit his "you"; Phenix's "transcendence" transcends countable reality; my own essay on intuition in Beyond the Scientific and the other essays in that volume, while not theological, also declare or imply the limitations of experimental psychology in particular, and syllogistic logic in general.

Of particular interest to educationists is the mounting discussion of the appropriate modes of inquiry in the social and behavioral sciences. James Q. Wilson, for example, reporting a study of crime deterrence, points out: "Whenever we try to discover a relationship between hard-to-measure fadtors that operate deep inside a complex social structure, we are well advised not to rely on any single method of analysis, and we are particularly well advised not to rely on statistical studies using aggregate data." (Wilson, p. 75)

Otto, in explaining the non-rational nature of the experience, discusses the following statement: "If there is a God and if He chose to reveal Himself, He could do it no otherwise than this". Otto continues:

> Such a conclusion is not the result of logical compulsion; it does not follow from clearly conceived premises; it is an immediate underivable judgment of pure recognition, and it follows a premiss (sic) that defies exposition and springs directly from an irreducible feeling of the truth. But that, as we have seen, is just the manner in which genuine divination, in the sense of an intuition of religious significance, takes place". (Otto, p. 170)

Tillich, similarly, speaks of the limitations of mathematical thinking.

> "...there are levels of reality of great difference, and...these different levels demand different approaches and different languages; not everything in reality can be grasped by the language which is most adequate for mathematical sciences.

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> "The difference, which is a fundamental difference between(signs and s ymbols) is that signs do not participate in any way in the reality and power of that to which they point. Symbols...participate in its meaning and power...The mathematician has usurped the term 'symbol' for mathematical 'signs' and this makes a disentanglement of the confusion almost impossible. The only thing we can do is to distinguish different groups, signs which are called symbols, and genuine symbols. The mathematical signs are signs which are wrongly called cymbols." (Tillich, pp. 54-5)

Huston Smith suggests a strategy, at the same time implying the method of scholarship of the theologians, who, after all, have a program to promote.

> In place of our usual tendency to begin with the accepted world and add to it only what collected evidence requires, I am asking if it would harm us to conjure the most interesting world we can and then drop from it what reason erases. There is some resemblance to Anselm's credo ut intelligam--'I believe in order to understand', or as Wilfred Smith, using current idiom to get at what credo meant in the Middle Ages, paraphrases Anselm, 'I get involved in order to understand'. (Smith, 1982, p. 151 note j)

What, then, is left for those preoccupied with educational matters, especially with the curriculum and teaching? I propose, with Bloom, that we extend our inquiry into the possibility that spiritual/peak experience can take place in the classroom. My own current efforts go in this direction. Taking the five categories I have derived from the vocabulary of the field, I ask

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what aspects of the peak/spiritual experience are intellectual, what are transcendent, what are the characteristics of the experience as a whole and in detail, and is there anything of the mystic in the experience? I am busy applying this framework to four of the great disciplines we offer in schools: Mathematics, Science, History, and Literature and the Arts.

In so doing, I depart somewhat from the theologians and from Bloom, and less so from Maslow. The theologians occupy themselves demonstrating the reality and theological significance of the spiritual experience. Bloom speculates that there are conditions in teaching that may awaken the peak experience. I am interested in the possibility that the sense of the wonderful, the amazing—and so on—can be found in the subject matter itself.

I begin with an unprovable assumption: that the great teachers awaken the peak/spiritual experience in some of their students because they evoke an awareness of some or all of these five qualities in their subject matter. My exploration of these subjects is still preliminary, but some possibilities occur at once.

In Mathematics, there is much that is astonishing, e.g., the invention of zero, elementary number theory, the application of Mathematics as a way of describing the Cosmos.

In Science, there are mind-boggling discoveries, especially in Physics; e.g., the proposition that the relative distance is equivalent between the objects in the cosmos and the particles in the atom; or the theories of cosmology; or the discoveries about the nature of life—and so on and on and on.

In History, the sense of "going beyond"—of the transcendent—

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arises at once from the understanding that History is embedded in time, and that time is infinite, or eternal. History deals with human events, and thus with the nature of Man, in all his bewildering, awesome complexity.

In Literature, too, is evoked the transcendent, the mystic, and the qualities of the spiritual/peak experience, if the teacher will let the writer speak directly to the reader. "I can smile, and murder as I smile", says Richard III, thus pointing to one of the great differences between Man and the animals that sheds light on what it is to be human.

In the Arts, as Maslow points out, are to be found many of the "triggers" that provoke the peak experience. Great artists constantly seek to deal with the greatest themes we know of. Who is not moved by the Verdi Requiem or the Hallelujah Chorus, to name only two of dozens of the great musical statements of our culture. Whose spirit is not lifted when Villella, the dancer, hangs suspended in space in one of his great leaps? When I was a teaching principal in an elementary school in California, years ago, I missed an opportunity to put a student in touch with what Bloom calls something fundamental. She was trying to make a picture of the ocean breaking on the shore: the problem, as she saw it, was to make the water look wet. What I failed to do was to call her attention to the universality of shore lines; to the truth, as pointed out by a poet friend of mine—that the shore is the end of Man's certainty; that as residents of the West Coast, we had nothing further to explore but the ocean itself. As my poet friend had written, "After this, Sea". That is, I had failed to raise the student's consciousness from the technical difficulty she

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faced to the universality of the problem she was portraying. Had I done so, the event might have been unforgettable for her.

What of evaluation in such a context as this? My impression is that we shall have to continue to collect and analyze subjective testimony. In a word, we shall have to learn to listen to our students—not merely, and coldly, to observe and measure them.

In the degree that we adopt this stance as a matter of habit, we will make it more likely that we will learn to evoke peak/spiritual experience in school, thus making some classroom events unforgettable. ~~thus responding to Benjamin Bloom's request that we continue to inquire into this phenomenon.~~

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